DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 213 FL 019 479

AUTHOR Christensen, Torkil
TITLE Teaching Reading to High School Graduates in Japan.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Hokusei Junior College Bulletin; v27 p1-16 1990

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Course Descriptions; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Higher Education; High School Students; Newspapers; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Skills; Reading Strategies; Translation
IDENTIFIERS *Japan

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a reading course for the first year of college for Japanese high school graduates. The course has been taught in large classes and utilizes extensive individualization of homework assignments at a level of difficulty that all students can cope with. The course provides students with strategies that will free them from exclusively relying on dictionaries when they are not sure of meanings, and may be seen as a first step for the students to develop the skills necessary for independent reading of English. The first part of the study discusses the status of the students' English reading skills and is followed by the objects and the aims of the course, which include broadening and applying the skills learned in high school, and the application of the various reading strategies and activities students are exposed to during the year. The goal of the course is for students to become capable of reading an English newspaper. (Author/JL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Christensen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED342213

Teaching Reading to High School Graduates in Japan

Torkil Christensen

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a reading course for the first year of college for Japanese high school graduates. The course has been taught in large classes, and utilizes extensive individualization of homework assignments, at a level of difficulty that all students can cope with. The course provides students with strategies that will free them from exclusively relying on dictionaries when they are not sure of meanings, and may be seen as a first step for the students to develop the skills necessary for independent reading in English.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will outline suggestions for teaching a reading course to high school graduates in Japan studying in large classes. The goal of the course is for the students to become able to find their way in an English language newspaper. The direct study of newspapers centers on the news stories, and generally English language newspapers available in Sapporo are used. The approach and development of the study is the result of experience gained over several years.

The aim of the course is to provide students with reading strategies that are generally applicable, rather than have them

FL019479

2 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

read a specified body of text. A class has forty-five to fifty students and meets for ninety minutes every week for a total of about twenty-five times from April to December.

The first part of the paper discusses the status of the students' English reading skills. This is followed by details of the course, broadening and applying the skills learned in high school, and application of the various reading strategies and activities students are exposed to during the year.

The course proceeds by first presenting students with activities that allow them to keep some distance from a text while they are still able to know what it may be about. Then, learning to pick specific information from texts without translating and carefully studying every word of the text, and finally trying to determine the writer's intent, as opposed to stopping at what the readers (students) would like to think that the text says.

THE STATUS OF READING SKILLS OF COLLEGE FRESHMEN

Students graduating from Japanese high schools and entering college with the intention of studying English, arrive with a very limited range of skills for continuing their language studies. The English study in high school has generally been quite intense and narrowly focused on preparations for the college entrance examinations administered to high school graduates. There has been a heavy focus on grammar and other formal aspects of English and little or no attention to production or contextual aspects of the language. The study has to a large extent been centered on determining correct answers to problems from entrance examinations administered in former years, and now available in published collections.

The English study has used multiple choice questions extensively, and while the correct responses may have been explained at great length, in Japanese, by the teacher, the students have rarely

been required to provide responses to questions unaided by suggestions like those provided with multiple choice questions. Further, the multiple choice questions are often not straightforward but may ask about matters that are somewhat obscure.

In their six years of language study, the students have not had any choice in the texts they have read. All texts presented have had to be deciphered, and students have learned to rely entirely on dictionaries if there is the smallest doubt about any aspect of a text. It must be noted that this is possibly a reasonable strategy to distinguish correct responses in the above mentioned multiple choice questions.

At times the study may even have focused on the entrance examination for a specific college, but most often the focus of the English study has been on what may be called a generic entrance examination, represented by test question collections that the high school English teacher has deemed likely to improve student chances at the tests.

Translation

Much of what is termed reading has involved putting texts into Japanese, and students arrive in college with the impression that reading in English is deciphering and translation. When students are asked to read, they will attempt to provide a word by word rephrasing into Japanese. When students are asked to read a sentence that requests action, for example:

Please write the number six at the end of the sentence.

The students will first ascertain what the equivalent sentence would be in Japanese, not write the number six at the end of the sentence, and await further instructions on how to proceed.

When asked to do as the sentence says, they will discuss this strange request with their neighbors, and attention is entirely on why such a request is made, what the request to act could mean, and why they would have been asked to do it. The confusion arises as they feel that by putting it into Japanese, they have already shown that they can read a text and so have read it, and feel that they need not bother further with it. Only in rare cases will they write the number six at the end of the sentence before awaiting further instructions or going on with their other tasks.

Understanding of Texts

Students may also become confused by what the sentence could mean. Does it (the sentence above) tell them to write a number six times, or is it the number six they have to write, and do they really have to write it, and if so then where? To clear up this confusion they will resolutely consult their dictionaries, which often contain sample sentences that may then be of help.

The reason for the confusion possibly arises from having responded to numerous multiple choice questions about texts of little interest, where they have picked a response, been happy when they were right, and felt it was bad luck when they were wrong. A test has contained a great number of such questions and after it has been completed and corrected, the number expressing the result has been an end in itself. The teacher (if the test was at school) may have gone through the test and explained what was correct and why, but often tests are purely for practice in taking tests, without any follow-up or attempts to learn or understand where they were wrong.

Volume and Quality of Reading

A further problem with the students' reading experience is the very low total volume of reading, and the kind of texts they have read. A reading lesson (approximately one hour) may have consisted of a 100 to 200 word text that is dissected into its component parts and rephrased into Japanese, and this is considered to represent reading of the text. No attention is paid to the contextual aspects of the text. Extensive reading has not been attempted.

High school graduates may never have chosen the texts they read. All texts have been assigned and probably selected for their suitable level of difficulty as they contain some grammatical form that is being studied. The students have never looked at a text, found it uninteresting and skipped it in favor of a more interesting one.

All printed materials in English that have been presented have had to be studied in great detail, and the first step in comprehension has invariably been to put the text into Japanese. No text has been read just because it seemed interesting or because the student would like to or needed to know the contents. The texts are usually far removed from the modern everyday, and little work is expended on relating texts to the students' everyday experiences or anything else, except putting them into Japanese and using them as vehicles for grammar instruction.

Dictionary Use

The indiscriminate reliance on dictionares is a source of much frustration. Any word where the meaning is not perfectly clear may be looked up in a dictionary. As a result even names of places or persons are often checked out, and as they do not

appear in the dictionaries, students decide that they do not understand what is said. Words that have several meanings may on the other hand be determined to represent a particular meaning that the student knows, and even when it clearly does not fit, they accept the result unquestioningly, irrespective of how garbled the resulting translation becomes.

Summary

At entry into college, inquiries about what the students themselves would like to read, or what their goals in reading in English are, will rarely provide information for how to conduct reading instruction. The students are used to and apparently comfortable with being assigned texts, rephrasing them into Japanese, responding to questions about what they have read, and then going on to the next assignment.

To summarize the situation of the students, they readily put texts into Japanese and consider this an end in itself. To the instructor, they seem unable to orient themselves in texts, unable to cope with any degree of ambiguity or lack of comprehension, unable to react to texts in terms of their own experience or interests, and to depend nearly exclusively on explanations (that they expect to be provided by a teacher) or dictionaries in trying to comprehend texts.

OBJECTS AND AIMS OF THE COURSE

As noted above, the focus of the course is to provide the students with skills that will enable them to read or at least find their way around an English language newspaper. The aim of the study in the first year out of high school then becomes to provide the students with reading strategies allowing them to cope with

texts, on their own and in a more realistic manner than in high school. It is for the students to learn to see that texts have meanings that they (the students) may or may not wish to know more about, and that they often already know something about.

The challenge is to get the students to be ready to read a variety of texts and respond to the texts based on the contents of the texts and how they found them interesting. They also have to be taught to skip texts or parts of texts that they for some reason are not attracted to, this at the same time as they have to read what they are offered in the lessons. In addition they also have to learn not to get unduly discouraged if they cannot understand every part of a text, and to keep working at it until they have found what they are looking for or till they think they have gotten enough out of it.

It is quite difficult to enlist student advice at the start of the first year of college, and the first item on the reading instruction agenda becomes not to discuss the wonderful thing that reading in English is, but to have the students look at texts in other ways than just rephrasing them into Japanese. This will sensitize them to different kinds of texts, to eventually enable them to determine what may be of value to them in their further study and use of English, and also make them aware of texts that they can read and are interested in.

The progression of the exercises is, first, to learn to look at texts without reading, then to find specific constructions, repeating words, verb phrases, etc. and to learn what can be deduced about a text with this. Next looking for items revealing the content of a text, learning to sum it up, and guessing about what is not explicitly stated. Finally comes learning to recognize what the writer probably wants to say.

THE COURSE

Starting – Looking at Texts

The lessons are ninety minutes long and at most the first thirty minutes are taken up with explaining what a new activity or strategy is, with the students doing exercises related to this in the remaining time. In the first lesson, the students are provided with a handout that details the goals of the course (becoming able to read newspapers), the method they should use (guessing, guessing, and guessing), the requirements for a passing grade: attendance, handing in of homework, tests, etc. The assignments that students do individually are tailored so that they can generally be completed within the class time available.

One problem at this stage is for students to understand instructions for what to do, and some attention is paid to explaining what specific instructions mean, perhaps even with a handout devoted to this. The handout in the first lesson is a good opportunity to start this part of the study.

In the first step, students are taught to look at texts before attempting to read in any detail. For this they are asked to look at titles, pictures, and other features (numbers, words in italics, etc.) They are also introduced to SQ3R and given opportunities to utilize this in their reading. It is important to encourage them to (insist that they) look at pictures and titles and guess what the story could be about. Students will initially be confused and have trouble understanding what the relation between such activities and reading could be. They will try however and when provided with ample opportunities and explanations of what the aims are, they will catch on. However it will take quite some practice before this, guessing about the text from pictures and titles before starting to read the text, becomes automatic, and it

may be necessary to remind them (to look and orient themselves before reading) regularly and with some persistence throughout the year.

One problem here is the large number of students and the small number of pictures presented in most textbooks. To overcome this problem, I prepare handouts with a great number of titles and pictures and have them look at these and respond to some of them. When the texts are not provided with this first handout, it somehow seems to be more meaningful and challenging. Then when they have "read" such texts without texts (only pictures and titles) they can be presented with the accompanying stories and allowed to read these.

It also seems to be important to have the students do it themselves with their neighbors looking at other titles and pictures. I generally provide about half a dozen sets and divide the students in some way so that neighbors only rarely are working on the same problems. This way of doing it also invites discussion with neighbors about the different titles, etc. and so exposes students to more examples than they themselves have to respond to. Often they will not bother with what the neighbors are working at before they have finished their own bit.

Next, looking at text specifics is introduced together with reading strategies. Here students have to look for specific words or constructions in texts. By providing a relatively large volume to read (compared with their high school experiences) they will be pressed for time, and when encourged to do so dispense with dictionaries at least some of the time even at this early stage.

Isolating Information

Next the students are asked to look for specific information (rather than words or constructions) in stories that may be about

people or other matters. The problem is to find texts that the students will find at least somewhat interesting. Stories about people seem more attractive than descriptions of anything else, maybe because the vocabulary and occurrences in the stories are easily grasped. Also, when provided with four or six stories they may be asked to do one particular story (a different story than their neighbor) and then from among the remaining select the one that appears most interesting, and determine the same information for this second story also.

Following this, students may be asked to read an opinionated text about something in a degree of detail they are not acquainted with (nutrition, work, the environment, etc.) and then evaluate a number of things or items based on criteria presented in the reading. Components in foodstuffs are very convenient here. Students are invariably interested in nutrition or at least dieting, and the vocabulary and concepts often relate simply to Japanese.

Summing up News Stories

Around the middle of the first semester, the students are introduced to news stories. They are provided with a handout containing about fifty leads (first paragraphs) of recent news stories. These leads are provided without headlines, but with datelines. The task here is to become able to quickly guess the contents of the whole story that tne lead represents, as well as to know and understand where the story was filed from.

The structure of newspaper leads allows guessing with great accuracy about the contents of the news story from the verb, subject, and something that complements this. The students are asked to determine the verb and subject and then attach some part of the lead paragragh to make it a complete statement (subject + verb + something). Generally there are several possibilities.

The something may be the time, place, cause, result, or something similar that is specifically mentioned in the opening sentence. Here the possibility of a variety of correct responses for the same lead paragraph is a good introduction to the variety in what attracts the attention of different readers when reading the same text.

The students are also asked if they would like to read the rest of the news stories. The first responses are invariably that they would like to, but with careful selection even the students will realize that there are news stories, and even in English, that they would rather skip. This insisting that they form an idea of how interesting a story is seems important, and something the students will try to avoid if at all possible.

At this point the students are also asked to summarize each paragraph of a ten to fifteen paragraph long story, in the manner of the leads. The summaries are to be four or at most five words long, and students are asked to read through the finished string of summaries to see that they more or less express what the story is about. After having done the leads, the students have few problems with this, and they seem to find the activity meaningful. I don't use the term summary when assigning this exercise. The students already know the term and have a set idea of what it means. Instead I ask them to express what is new each paragraph, and the result is a summary.

Reading a Newspaper

The next two lessons apply the various techniques and strategies that have been presented so far, first with a newspaper, and next looking over a one page extract of a story. The students are asked to buy and bring an English language newspaper, and most manage to do it after explanations of where to get it and which

to buy (any). It is generally the first time for them to own this kind of reading matter and it occasions some unease.

The assignment with the newspaper asks them to mark the subject + verb + something for a substantial number of lead paragraphs and to determine whether they find these news items interesting. Also, they are to find interesting pictures and titles and make summaries of news stories. The assignment is written on the blackboard or (better) typed on a handout distributed to each student. This (and the following) assignment takes up a full ninety minute class period.

With the one page extract of a story, the students are also asked to guess about what came before and what comes after the particular page they are dealing with. It is now late in the semester, and this is the first time they are asked to guess about something that they probably will not ever get to read (the remaining parts of the stories), and coupled with the other techniques and strategies they have learned, this exercise seems to offer quite a challenge. Here also, six or more one page extracts are prepared and each student is assigned one, and asked to pick one more that appears interesting.

Responding to Text

During the semester, students are asked to respond to simple questions or statements on the handouts. Several handouts will have a number of questions like:

Please draw four lines connecting the two lines here
(lines provided).

Put a circle in two of the squares (a dozen squares provided).

Draw a line around five of the squares (" " ").

Copy figure number six (from a string of ten or so figures).
Fill in two of the figures (" " " " " ").
Draw three of figure two (" " " " " ").

This is difficult the first one or two times—it has to be right, and when not it gets returned for redoing, repeatedly if necessary. After they catch on, though, and realize that there is no way around doing it right, it becomes a challenge that they do without further ado when handouts are distributed.

Also here, six or more sets of different sentences are used, and this makes the preparation somewhat complex but with a computer not so difficult. If all students are provided with the same set of sentences, most of the effect will be lost. Insisting on perfectly correct answers, with demands for redoing the exercise if necessary also helps to concentrate the students. This sort of exercise is generally presented two or three times in the first semester, and in the second semester, after the summer holidays, one or two times. If it goes well the first time in the second semester, it is not repeated.

Evaluating the Usefulness of Reading Strategies

The final assignment before the summer holidays involves evaluating the usefulness of the reading strategies students have learned. The textbook for the course introduces about two dozen reading strategies, and at the halfway point, the students have been in contact with about a dozen of these, in addition to the techniques detailed above. The students are now provided with lists of some of the strategies and techniques they have been exposed to, and asked to evaluate their utility with the dozen texts they have read so far in the textbook. They are asked to determine the three most useful strategies and the least useful for

comprehending each text.

The Second Semester

After the summer holidays the first exercise presents original and simplified versions of the same stories. The simplifications mainly consist of word replacements, and students are asked to compare the two texts and note the different words that are used to express the same thing. They are then asked to express their opinion (surprising, strange, natural, etc.) of these word (or phrase) pairs that have similar meanings but use different words.

Other new exercises in the second semester involve identifying signal words for lists, differences and similarities, and cause-effect statements. The students are also asked to assess numbers as expressed in the metric and British measuring systems and learn to convert them from one to the other. Synonyms are also presented, and the students go looking in a thesaurus to observe the variety of ways there are to say the same thing. They are then asked to evaluate the differences presented by the similar but different words.

They are also asked to construct "word maps," to determine how a set of words relate, a la semantic mapping. The students need some encouragement to get going with this kind of exercise, and I provide a number of words and then ask them to add their own when they have used some of my suggestions. I also ask them to express the relation between two connected words in the maps with a verb. They are asked to express the "word map" in a short paragraph, as well.

They are also introduced to more reading strategies, and the main ones in the second semester are that explanations of technical terms and similar unusual words may be found in the text, and that the common developmental progress of a text is from the

general to the specific.

We also spend a lesson with a second newspaper, and one with a paperback (available in the library) and with these they are asked to do some of the activities they did in the first semester, as well as apply the new reading strategies and skills learned in the second semester. Towards the end of the second semester, the students are provided with excerpts of stories and asked to determine what the author intends to convey. The students are asked to assess what is intended and to provide "proof" of their suggestions. The proof has to be in the text or be clearly understood from what the text describes.

CONCLUSIONS

The students arrive in college with very poorly developed skills for reading English texts of any kind. The object of the course outlined here is to provide them with skills and strategies to allow them to read independently, intelligently, and without waste of time and effort.

This initially causes some confusion in the students. The stark contrast between the single-minded approach to reading they have experienced in high school and the less clearly delineated ways they are encouraged to use now, makes it necessary to provide quite extensive explanations of rationales and also to make sure that the students read in the way they are asked to. This is achieved with a high degree of individualization of the assignments and the provision of explanations while they do the exercises. It has been found that providing the rationale before the students start on an activity is little effective in convincing them of the utility of the activity. However when they have completed a part of the assignments and then hear why they have been asked to do what they are doing, they are easier to convince and they also

seem to remember better that way.

Through the year they develop confidence in reading and digesting quite considerable amounts of reading in relatively short periods, and also gain confidence in purposefully looking around in English language newspapers.

The skills that the students learn in this course are not all the skills they need to become fluent readers who can rapidly size up a text. However they are a first step, and the variety of activities provides a basis to help them to further develop their skills as readers, when that becomes necessary in their further studies or work.

日本における高校卒業生のための読解指導

トーキル・クリステンセン

要　旨：

本論におけreading courseの対象は、日本の高校卒業者で大学一年目をむかえた学生である。この指導方法は、大規模クラスで教えてきたので、個々の学生に広範な自由課題をわりあてるが、難易度はどんな学生にもついて行ける程度である。このcourseによって学生は、意味がわからないとき、辞書一辺倒にならずにすむ技術を身につける。本courseは、学生が独力で英語を読むために必要な技術を発達させるための第一段階といえる。